

The Way It Should Have Been

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Introduction

I know other people have done their own versions of ATAI--I've read plenty of them. And many of them were quite good. But I always thought that Clark acted in an incredibly irrational fashion in that episode, and as a result got in a lot more trouble with Lois than was necessary. So here is my take on ATAI, one in which Clark has a sudden attack of common sense, and where things might have worked out a little differently. Some of the scenes and dialogue from ATAI have been reproduced here for continuity's sake and I hereby credit them to the writers of the show. The characters and recognizable settings are the property of D.C. Comics, Warner Bros, etc. etc. The changes in the story are mine.

The Way It Should Have Been by Nan Smith Rated G Submitted July 1999

"No, no...no, don't put me on hold..." Clark Kent set down the phone in frustration and sheer discouragement. Zurich Air was giving him the runaround treatment, and he was out of time. With a defeated sigh, he pulled out the Metro phone book to look up the address of Mazik's Jewelers. It was late evening, but the Daily Planet newsroom was still busy, people were moving here and there, intent on completing their chores before the shift ended.

A voice, deliberately light, spoke behind him. "Oh, looking to buy me something?"

Clark turned his head, startled that he had not heard her approach. Lois stood there with a look on her face that he recognized--falsely cheerful and unconcerned, and the fact made him wary. He rose to his feet. "Um...I, uh, I was going to get an anniversary present for my parents. I better get to the stores before they close."

Lois wasn't going to buy this one, he figured. It wasn't one of his more inspired excuses, after all, but to his astonishment she appeared to accept

the statement without question.

"Good idea, you better do that."

Clark looked back, puzzled. This wasn't typical Lois behavior. What was going on here? "You're not mad?"

"At what?"

"That once again I'm running off."

"Well," she said casually, "why should I be? Dr. Friskin really helped set me straight on this. She helped me to realize, and even accept, that people have separate lives and no matter how involved we are, sometimes it's appropriate to do things apart."

"Huh!" Clark started to turn toward the ramp. It was a good thing Lois was being reasonable about this, no matter how out of character it was.

The alarm bells were going off in his subconscious, and one finally managed to make itself heard. He paused in the act of turning and looked at Lois's carefully neutral expression. Oh-oh. This wasn't good. With the sensation of treading on cracked eggs, he made a split second decision.

"Lois, will you come with me?"

She wasn't expecting that. Her jaw dropped infinitesimally and he saw the surprise in her face, no matter how carefully she tried to mask it. "Come with you? Where are you really going?"

The sense of urgency made his voice harsher than he'd intended. "Lois, I don't have time to discuss it. Either come with me, or not. I have to go." He turned back to the ramp and started to ascend. She hesitated for only a second, then seized her shoulder bag and hurried after him.

Lois couldn't believe it. He had actually asked her to accompany him on one of his mysterious exits. Maybe, finally, he was going to let her know what was behind all of his unexplained disappearances.

He was ringing for the elevator as she joined him. "All right, I'll come with you. But I want an explanation."

"You'll get one." His voice was tense and low; it probably couldn't be heard ten feet away. "Just not here, where people can overhear me."

She was about to retort when she saw the look on his face. She'd never seen that expression on Clark before; grim, stern-visaged--for a moment he reminded her strongly of Superman but she dismissed the thought as illusion. The question remained unanswered, however. Clark was upset; she knew her partner well enough by now to recognize the telltale signs. She was still angry and hurt at his earlier behavior,

but her reporter's instincts told her that there was more behind this than she had guessed.

The elevator arrived at last and they boarded. As the doors closed she said, "All right, let's have it. Where are we going?"

Clark deliberately punched the button for the first floor. "Mazik's Jewelers. I'm going to rob it."

"What? Clark, that's not funny!"

"It wasn't meant to be. Mazik's has a shipment of uncut diamonds that I have to steal, or my Mom and Dad are going to be killed, and my life is going to be destroyed."

Whatever she had expected, it wasn't this. "That was what that phone call was about this morning? And the one later, at the Planet?"

"Yes. The one this morning...you remember, I was going to tell you something?"

"Yes."

"It was something important about me. A secret only my parents and I knew. I have to tell you before we can take our relationship any farther. No matter what happens, I know I can trust you with it. But, somehow, this...person found it out. He claimed he has proof, and threatened me with exposure if I didn't follow his orders."

The elevator door opened and they exited in silence. Lois took his hand and led the way deliberately to her Jeep. Only after the doors were closed and she was starting the engine did Clark continue.

"I told him I wouldn't," Clark said. "Secret or no secret, it wasn't worth that. So he upped the stakes. That was the second call at the Planet."

"He kidnapped your parents." Lois pulled out of the parking space, biting her lip. "Clark, I'm so sorry. I've been thinking the most horrible things about you, and treating you so badly, and all the time you were..."

"You couldn't know. But now I've run out of time. I have to do what he says, stall him, until I can get Mom and Dad back."

"You don't think he'll release them, after you..."

Clark gave her a sardonic look. "What do you think?"

"Probably not." Lois swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. Clark looked so grim, and somehow desperate. She'd never seen this side of him before. "But why does he think *you* could rob a jewelry store successfully? You're a reporter, not a jewel thief!"

"It has to do with what I was going to tell you--the Secret. No," he answered her unspoken question, "I'm not a thief, I'm not a criminal. But I do have certain...skills that I can use to do this. I want you to wait in the Jeep. I don't want you anywhere near that store. And when I'm finished, we'll talk. Really talk. I'll tell you everything."

And then, maybe we can figure out what to do." He held her eyes with his for a long second before she turned back to watch the road.
"Promise me this one time, Lois, that you'll do as I ask and stay out of this part of it. It's my parents' lives at stake. And I don't want you implicated." He gave a faint grin. "If I *do* get caught, I'm relying on you to get me a good lawyer." For a moment a hint of humor lit his dark eyes, then it flickered out. Lois found herself nodding.

The robbery went smoothly. Clark, clad in black clothing, knit cap and black leather jacket, entered the store with uncanny skill, while Lois waited, holding her breath, for an alarm to sound; but none came. The long minutes ticked slowly by. Once it seemed certain he would be caught when an employee entered the store, switched on the lights and moved around inside. Lois was trying frantically to think of some sort of diversion to help save her partner when the lights went out and the man left. Clark must have found somewhere to hide. She relaxed slightly and let out her breath. A few moments later Clark emerged, so silently that she almost didn't see him. He opened the door and slid into the seat beside her.

"Where now?" she asked.

"Centennial Park, according to the instructions." He leaned back in the seat and took a long, shuddering breath. "God, Lois, I've never done anything like that before. I feel like I need a shower."

"Just keep in mind we're doing this to save your parents' lives," she said. "We'll see to it the store gets its diamonds back."

He looked at her in surprise. "'We'?"

"Of course 'we'. We're partners. Whatever affects one affects the other. Even your big secret--whatever it is."

"When I tell you, you're probably going to kill me," he said, only half humorously. "I want you to know, though, that I do trust you...I trust you completely. I've wanted to tell you this before, but every time I'd work up the nerve something would happen to interrupt. Just promise me one thing."

"What?"

"That you'll wait until after my Mom and Dad are safe before you explode. Then, you can be as mad at me as you like. I can take it...I hope."

"I doubt I'll be mad," she said.

"Trust me; you'll be mad." He looked somberly at the dark bag he held, hiding as it did a fortune in diamonds. "But I want you to remember that since we've been friends, as well as partners, I haven't doubted you for an instant. I know I can tell you this...thing about me, and never be afraid you'll betray it to anyone."

"It sounds awfully serious," she said.

He gave a humorless little laugh. "Believe me, if it gets out my life is pretty much over."

A few moments later Lois pulled the Jeep into the shadows at the side of the road by Centennial Park. Clark got out.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he said, and vanished like the proverbial ghost into the darkness. Lois waited, counting the seconds, then the minutes as time stretched with apparent endlessness and Clark didn't return. After it seemed as if an hour had passed, she glanced at her watch and was surprised to discover it had been barely five minutes.

She could hear the blood thrumming in her ears, the silence was so intense. What was this terrible secret of Clark's? she wondered. Whatever it was, he was obviously truly afraid to tell her, but he'd just as obviously committed himself to doing so. He'd said he wasn't a criminal and she believed him. Then what could it be? Was he the heir to some small, European monarchy? Or a member of the Witness Protection Program? All sorts of bizarre and unlikely possibilities flitted through her mind. He'd said she'd be mad--seemed almost certain of it, in fact. Her imagination began to supply her with one horrifying scenario after another, each worse than the last, and the more she tried to dismiss her imaginings, the more lurid they became. When Clark appeared suddenly out of the shadows and knocked softly at the window of the Jeep, she gasped in fright.

But this was Clark, after all--the man who had been her partner for two years and whom she would trust with her life. Instantly all her imaginings seemed ridiculous, childish fantasy. Whatever Clark's terrible secret was, they could handle it together. He hadn't killed anyone, and he wasn't wanted by the law. The rest they could manage.

He slid into the seat beside her. She looked questioningly at him.
"What happened?"

"What I expected to happen. He wants more."

She nodded, soberly. "It's not exactly a surprise, is it?"

"No." He leaned forward and put his face in his hands, elbows on his knees. "Lois, I don't know what to do. I've never felt so helpless."

She rested a hand on his shoulder. "We'll figure something out, Clark. We're Lane and Kent, 'the hottest team in town'. We'll get him, and we'll save your parents. This pitiful little blackmailer is no match for us. You'll see."

He looked up at her and smiled. It was a wobbly smile, but it was still a smile. "Thank you, Lois, I knew I could count on you. You've never failed me. Even when you didn't know it."

That was an odd thing to say, she thought. Clark could be cryptic at times.

She shook herself. "So, now what?"

"Now, I guess we could go to my place. Or yours. The moment of truth can't wait much longer or I'll lose my nerve--again."

She started the engine. "Your place is closer."

In his apartment, he busied himself for several moments, setting the kettle on to boil for tea, making sure she had a dish of double double chocolate fudge ice cream (with chocolate sauce), being certain (for the second time) that the door was safely locked, the pagers, cell phone and the ringer for his apartment phone were all turned off and the telephone answering machine was on. Lois could tell he was stalling, delaying the inevitable for a few moments more. This was really scaring him, she realized with some amazement. Her unflappable partner was terrified of what she would say when she heard whatever it was he had to tell her.

When he had checked all the various communication devices for the third time she decided it was time to step in. She rose to her feet, approached him and took his hand. Without a word, she led him to the sofa, pushed him onto it and seated herself beside him.

"All right, Clark, enough! What is this deep, dark secret of yours? You've got me imagining all sorts of horrors! It can't possibly be worse than what I'm thinking."

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "Sorry. I guess I was sort of--"

"Stalling? Dragging your feet? Delaying? You bet! Now, talk!"

"Okay." He cleared his throat. "Lois, you know how I'm always running off?"

"I believe I've mentioned it a time or two."

"Yeah." He cleared his throat again. "Well, it's not because I'm afraid of ...intimacy, or commitment. It's because--" He stopped.

"Go on."

"Oh, God." He put his face in his hands again. "This is harder than I thought."

"Clark, it can't be that bad. Tell me."

He looked up at her and closed his eyes for an instant. Lois knew a moment of real fear. Whatever this was, Clark was really scared! She took his hands in hers. "Clark, tell me," she said again, gently.

She saw him clench his jaw. "Okay. Lois, I've been leading two lives. One is Clark Kent. The other is someone else I become so I can have a private life, not be harassed all the time, and still help people." He took off his glasses. "Look at me, Lois. Who do you see?"

She stared at his face. She had never seen him without his glasses before, and without them he looked very different--just as good-looking, but not...

He looked like Superman.

"Oh my God," she whispered.

Clark stood up and moved to the center of the room, facing her. He removed the leather jacket, reached down and grasped the black, pullover shirt. In a flash, it was off, dangling in one hand. Lois found herself staring at the famous "S" shield on blue spandex over a magnificently muscled chest. Clark gave her a tiny smile and suddenly spun like a miniature, blue tornado. When he stopped, Superman stood there. All traces of Clark Kent were gone. He stood, arms crossed over his chest in the classic Superman pose, facing her. "This is what I've been trying to tell you."

"And...you thought I'd be angry?" She stared, trying to take it all in. In a fraction of a second, a close friend had vanished forever; two men she had loved in different ways had melded into one man. A great many things suddenly made sense, and for a moment she felt a flash of anger, directed as much at herself as at him.

But he had trusted her enough to tell her his thing about himself, counted on her not to betray him, even if she was angry at him. The fact was humbling in a way, and the duel identity explained so much. The realization was almost blinding.

"You ran away to help people in trouble," she said. How many times had Clark disappeared, only to have Superman arrive to save the day? How many times had he saved her life even when she didn't know it, both as Clark and Superman? Superman had smashed into the Nightfall Asteroid, come crashing back to Earth in a fireball so intense that even his uniform had been incinerated, then been missing for two days...the same two days that Clark had been a victim of amnesia.

She pulled in a deep breath. She might be angry when she had time to think about it, but she'd promised to wait until Martha and Jonathan Kent were safe. Clark--Superman--had asked for her help. She would give it to him.

Of course, later she might flay him alive, but right now he just couldn't handle it, if she was any judge--too much stress for too long. She could see it in his face, in the little signs of tautness around the eyes and mouth. Superman--Clark (Oh, God, what was she supposed to call him?)--was right on the edge.

"Clark, come sit down." She patted the cushion next to her. "I'm not going to blow up at you--at least right now."

A faint smile answered her feeble joke and he obeyed her request. She took the hand that rested on his knee.

"Clark, I'm not going to pretend I'm not stunned--or shocked. Maybe even a little angry. I'll have to think about that one for awhile. But I'm also honored by the fact that you trust me with this...secret. And you're right, it's a big secret. I wish you'd told me sooner, but--" She stopped and took a breath to steady her voice; the reaction was starting to set in, the realization of how much the world she thought she knew had changed.

"But," she continued, "I think I can understand why you didn't. We'll talk about all of it later, after this is all over and I get around to kicking myself for not seeing it before."

"Lois, why should you have seen it? I forget where I heard it, but someone once said 'you see what you expect to see'. You had no reason to see Superman working next to you at the Daily Planet, or eating pizza and drinking beer with you while we watched a rented movie together. I made sure that no one ever even considered that Superman would ever do those things. If Clark Kent is to have any kind of private life, no one must ever connect us in that way. Which brings us back to the problem at hand."

"Yes, the problem," Lois said. "That someone apparently has. Do you trust him not to make public what he knows after this is over?"

"Are you kidding? What I'm scared of is that he's going to keep it going indefinitely. He has to know I'll never stop hunting him."

"That," Lois said very quietly, "or he intends to get rid of you and your parents when he's done."

"He'd have to get hold of Kryptonite for that. There isn't much around."

"No, but there is that small amount," Lois pointed out. "Nigel St. John had the piece Lex got from Rollie Vale, which means he--whoever 'he' is--*could* have gotten his hands on it. Um..." She hesitated. "Would you mind being Clark again? I can think a lot better without that red 'S' staring me in the face."

He gave that small, tentative smile and nodded. "Just a minute. Let me get the tea, and we can get down to work on this." He strode out of the room, the red cape swinging behind him. Lois shook her head. It was hard to be mad at Superman, even knowing intellectually that he was Clark. And that outfit sure didn't hide any of his physical beauty, that was certain--in fact, it was pretty darn distracting!

Clark walked back in with the teapot in one hand and two cups in the other. He was wearing a pair of jeans, a sleeveless pullover and no glasses. The effect was almost as distracting as the Suit, but she only said, "Why don't you tell me exactly what's happened so far, Clark, and what you've found out. We can go from there."

"Okay." He set the items he carried down, was gone and back again instantly with the sugar and other items. Lois stopped herself from gaping at the unconscious display of ability; after all, his powers didn't disappear with the Suit, she reminded herself. Suddenly, she laughed.

Clark looked over at her questioningly. "What's so funny?"

"When I think," Lois said, "about all the time I spent wondering if the Suit came off--and all the time, you--" She broke off in amusement, watching his face turn a becoming shade of red. "Never mind. At least that's one small question answered. So, what's happened so far?"

He ran over the entire story in his mind once more before beginning. The whole episode made his gut clench up with anxiety and despair

again. He poured the tea into two cups, added three teaspoons of sugar to his and swallowed half a cupful in one gulp, oblivious to the fact that the hot liquid was barely below the boiling point. But it seemed to help him regain his emotional equilibrium. "It started with that phone call this morning..." He told her about the voice that had told him it knew his secret, about the so called "diary" that was supposed to be written by a time traveler, that predicted for its owner all the important events that would happen in the next couple of hundred years, including the arrival of Superman, and his secret identity. The voice had directed him to the dumpster to find the little videophone, but the picture had shown him only the shadow of his tormenter. He had decided to go public with his identity, he explained, to stop the blackmailer, and then Mr. X had called the Daily Planet to tell him he now had Clark's parents.

"I came back here. The place was a mess--they'd taken Mom and Dad, but there'd been a fight. The only clue I had was a scent--a flower scent. Whoever had been here was wearing a flower that smelled like cherry vanilla."

He'd traced the scent to a flower stand and discovered that the flower in question was an exotic orchid. "You don't even want to know the name--" The only big buyer of the orchid was Zurich Air, which gave them to their First Class passengers.

"So that's what I was doing when you came into the office awhile ago--trying to get the passenger list from Zurich Air, and getting the royal runaround."

"Well..." Lois blew gently on her tea. "Let's give them a taste of what it's like to have the team of Lane and Kent on their case. We're going to do this, Clark. There's no way I'll let some petty little extortionist do this to you."

Clark tried to hide his surprise by taking another swallow of tea. Lois appeared unaware of what she had said or--more importantly--how she had said it. "Okay, what do you suggest for a first step?"

She set down the cup. "*I'm* going to start by making some calls. *You're* going to try to get some rest. You're worn out. Even Superman must get tired sometimes, and this has been a horrible day for you. If I get any results, I'll call you. If I don't, I'll wake you up in a couple of hours and you can take over while I get some sleep. All right?"

They were still getting the runaround from Zurich Air the next morning when Sergeant Zymack arrived in the Daily Planet newsroom. Lois was speaking on the phone while Clark leaned over the back of her chair, listening to the conversation. Zymack came directly across the room toward them. "Can I talk to you, Kent?"

Clark straightened up, swallowing the apprehensive lump in his throat; Lois set the phone down--they'd put her on hold again, of course--and rose to her feet beside him in an oddly protective gesture.

"Sure, Sergeant," Clark said.

Zymack came right to the point. "That jewelry store that got hit last night? They have this hidden security camera." He thrust a photograph

at the pair. "Sure looks like you."

Clark took the photograph, and he and Lois looked at it.

It was a damningly vivid picture. The security camera had caught him from the side, not quite in profile. He was wearing the knit cap, dark clothing and leather jacket, and his face was clearly visible. Clark stood, stunned, unable to think of a thing to say.

Lois took the photo from his hand and examined it before handing it back to the police officer. "That could be anybody, Zymack."

"Well--" The sergeant looked back at Clark. "Same nose, same chin...same glasses. Where were you last night from--say--nine o'clock on?"

Clark opened his mouth, at a loss for how to reply without lying. Lois didn't hesitate; she spoke immediately, giving the one alibi Zymack would accept without question.

"He was with me."

Clark couldn't have said how grateful he was to her at that moment. He knew what Zymack would think; exactly what Lois intended for him to think. A young, attractive man, an undeniably beautiful woman--what could be more obvious? And Zymack's amused expression said it all.

Clark stepped hurriedly into the silence. "Sergeant, you know us. Do you really think I'd commit a burglary? And do you really think Lois would lie about it?"

Zymack conceded the point, the amused look still on his face. "No...no, I don't. But you got a double out there, somewhere, Kent." He started to turn away.

"Uh, Sergeant--" Clark spoke suddenly. "If I ask Superman to help you find your thief, would you do us a favor? We need some information...from Zurich Air. Regarding something we're working on..."

Lois had picked up the phone. Now she silently held out the receiver to Zymack. The sergeant regarded her for a second, then grunted.

"All right." He took the instrument and spoke into it. "Uh, yeah. This is Sergeant Zymack of the Metropolis Police Department. Badge number zero eight six four..."

The passenger list arrived a short time later and with it the information they needed in the form of a pseudonym: Nicholas S. Janicek, A.K.A. Nigel St. John, who had been Lex Luthor's butler and all round jack of all dirty tricks, who had in the end betrayed his former employer to the law in the form of Superman. Another phone call established how the passenger fare had been paid: by credit card in the name of Jason T. Mazik.

"Mazik?" Lois said, wide-eyed. "As in Mazik Jewelers?"

"Yes," Clark said. "As in Mazik Jewelers. Wait here, Lois."

"Clark, no!" She caught his arm and indicated the conference room.
"We need to talk."

He hesitated, clearly undecided, then followed her. As the door closed behind them, she faced him fiercely.

"You're not going to confront them this way, Clark! Nigel St. John is involved and that means they have access to the piece of Kryptonite! When they're done getting what they want they're going to kill you and your parents. If you go charging in there to confront them, it could push them into something too soon."

"But..."

"*No*, Clark! As long as you're alive they aren't likely to do anything to Jonathan and Martha. Your parents are the only real hold they have over you, and they know it. But let them trap you and they have no further reason to keep them alive."

Her impassioned argument made sense. Clark chewed his lip, but nodded reluctantly. "Then what do we do?"

"How about a background check on Mr. Mazik?" Lois suggested.
"Including his financial records? Maybe those will tell us something. After all, if he's the extortionist, if he had you rob his own store..."

Clark opened the conference room door. "Jimmy!" they chorused.

"Jason T. Mazik," Jimmy was saying, two hours later, "isn't the owner. His younger brother is."

"Younger brother?" Clark asked.

"Yeah. His father's will specified that. Practically cut him completely out of the family business. He's an officer with the company, but not one of the owners."

"Maybe for a good reason," Lois murmured softly. "How about his finances?"

"Not nearly as well off as you might expect," Jimmy reported. "And, he's heavily in debt--gambling, mostly. I didn't know how far you wanted me to go back in his financial records, but I figured six months ought to be okay, for a start."

"Thanks, Jimmy." Lois took the sheaf of papers and glanced at Clark.
"Conference room."

"You take this half," Lois said. His uplifted hand stopped her.

"Let me have them. Stand right there," he said. "It'll block the view."

She moved to stand where he had indicated and watched, eyes widening a little as he ruffled through the papers so fast that both hands and

papers became a blur.

"I imagine," she said a little dryly, "that those powers of yours come in pretty handy during investigations."

"They do," he said absently. "There's only one thing here that seems a bit odd. He's been making utility payments to Metropolitan Electric for the last three months, for a building at the old air base outside of town."

"What would he be using it for?" Lois asked. "The place is deserted."

They looked at each other. "It would make a great place to hide something--or someone--you didn't want found," Clark said.

"I'm going, too," Lois said.

He started to protest, then bit back the objection. Lois had earned it. "Come on, then. We'll leave from the roof."

A few minutes later they were soaring high over the city. To Lois, who had flown in Superman's arms many times before, it was in its own way a new sensation, knowing--*knowing*--that the arms that held her so securely were not only those of Superman, but of Clark as well--her partner, and the man whom she loved. Okay, there were still a lot of unanswered questions he needed to clear up, but the fact remained that she still loved him, and it resolved that old, nagging feeling of disloyalty to each man when she had been in the arms of the other. She had loved both because somewhere, underneath, some instinctive part of her had recognized them as the same man, even if the conscious, reasoning part hadn't had a clue. It was a tremendous relief.

She turned her head and found him looking at her, and smiling. Clark's smile. Why hadn't she seen it before? She'd had Superman for a partner and best friend for the better part of two years, and as a...well, at least trying for a closer relationship with her for who knew how long?

"Clark?" she asked.

"What?"

"Why did you tell me that you didn't love me, after Luthor...after I almost married him? Was it true?"

"No. I lied."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want you to be uncomfortable working around me. I didn't want to lose your friendship."

"And you *were* in love with me?"

He nodded. "I've loved you since the moment I saw you--when you came storming into Perry's office and interrupted my interview...I felt like I'd been poleaxed. That's why I tried again the next day. I had to figure out a way to get near to you--even if it was only as a

co-worker."

"Oh." Wow. The thought was a little mind-boggling. He'd had her in his sights for that long and she'd had no idea. And she called herself an investigative reporter. Somehow, when it came to Clark, that particular kind of blindness seemed to be chronic. She was going to have to take a hard look at herself later, when all of this was over.

"There's the airbase." His voice interrupted her thoughts. She spotted it, well ahead, and noticed that he had begun to gain altitude.

"What are you doing?"

"If anyone is there, I don't want to give them any warning," he said. "So we'll fly high enough that they won't be likely to see us unless they're really alert."

Oh. "That makes sense." She tightened her clasp on his neck slightly. She'd never been this high before, except in a plane. Wisps of clouds curled around them as they flew and everything below them looked like a toy landscape, but she felt perfectly safe. There was no way on Earth her own private pilot would let her come to harm if it was within his power to prevent it. "What do you see?"

"Just a minute. I'm scanning." He was silent, and she waited impatiently.

"There," he said, so suddenly that she jumped.

"What?"

"There's a building down there with one section I can't see into."

"Lead lined?"

"That would be my guess. Just by coincidence, it appears to be the one the power's going to."

"Aha," Lois said quietly. "Let's go."

He nodded. "All right. But *please* stay behind me."

"Okay, okay," she said. "Come on!"

They drifted down to a silent landing a short distance from the building in question and Superman scanned the area again. "I don't see anyone. I don't think they can know we're coming."

"So--now what?"

"I guess we go see what's there."

The building looked empty, which didn't mean a thing, of course. Superman focussed his hearing, first tuning out the sounds of Lois's heartbeat and breathing, but the building before them was completely silent.

"I don't think anyone's there," he told Lois. "I can't hear anything."

"There's got to be a reason for the lead lined area," she insisted. "And if they lined it against Superman's x-ray vision, why couldn't they soundproof it against your super hearing?"

"That's a thought. But why would they know they'd need it?"

"I think there's something funny about this whole thing," Lois said. "I think they planned to kidnap your parents from the start. It's pretty coincidental that they decided to do this when Jonathan and Martha were here, don't you think? Anyone with any sense should know ordinary blackmail wouldn't work against Superman. Besides, what normal person in his right mind would believe that story about the diary of a time traveler, anyway? Even if it's true, they'd think he faked it and laugh their heads off at him."

He looked at her with a touch of awe. "What would I do without you? You're right. I just hadn't considered it before."

"You've had a lot on your mind," she pointed out. "It's not surprising that you hadn't thought of it. Anyway, we better be careful. Who knows what they've got rigged up for you in there?"

The side door was locked, as expected. Lois got out her picklock and went to work. It took her about five minutes and the lock clicked back. Superman pulled her back, eased the door open and looked inside.

A bare, empty hall, lit from above by fluorescent lights, greeted them. Superman lifted Lois by means of an arm about her waist, and they glided forward, barely an inch above the floor.

The door closed silently behind them. Both looked back at it, then uneasily at each other, but they kept moving forward. If Jonathan and Martha Kent were here, Lois knew, and Mazik and St. John knew she and Clark had found them, there wouldn't be a second chance to get them free.

"I see you found us, Superman." The voice was familiar, slightly mocking, with a cultured British accent, and it came from somewhere above. "Jase didn't think you were clever enough, but I knew. If you'll just follow the corridor it will lead you straight to your parents."

Superman stopped short.

"Go on, Superman--or should I say Mr. Kent? You know what will happen to your parents should you refuse."

"Go on, Superman," Lois whispered. "We don't have a choice!"

"Indeed you don't, Miss Lane." The voice was still light and mocking, but underneath there was a cold edge that raised the short hairs on her neck. "Go ahead, Mr. Kent--if you wish to save your parents."

Superman began to glide forward once more. They came to a door which

opened as they approached. A young man was waiting for them. He smiled--literally smirked!--at them.

"Hi there, Supes! I have to hand it to you, you're brighter than I gave you credit for! Or was this *your* idea, Lois? You *are* Lois, aren't you? I thought I recognized you! Lane and Kent--'the hottest team in town'! My, this *is* an honor!"

Superman set Lois on her feet and grabbed Jason Mazik by the collar. "I recognize your voice! *Where* are my parents?"

"You mean, 'Where are my parents', *sir*!" He seemed unaware of Superman's grip on his collar. "Or have you forgotten what I have here?" He patted the left breast of his tailored jacket.

"Now, now, boys, you mustn't fight." Nigel St. John entered the room. Lois turned to look at him. He was, as always, immaculately groomed, white hair and small, neat beard carefully combed. He carried a grey, metal box in his hands, and she could guess what was in it, but before she could open her mouth, he lifted the lid. "It wouldn't be fair...to Superman."

Superman staggered backwards. Lois could see the greenish glow that emanated from the box and gathered herself to jump hopelessly at St. John, but now, in his other hand, he held a small pistol which he swung to point directly at her.

"I wouldn't do that, Miss Lane."

Lois didn't resist as they pushed Clark and her into the room with the Kents. Jonathan and Martha surged forward to catch their son as he was shoved roughly through the door, only to be waved back by St. John's gun. Superman fell to the floor, unable to stop himself.

Mazik was clearly loving every second of the sense of power the Kryptonite he held in his hands gave him, as he set it carefully down beside Superman.

"Now," he told Superman, almost giggling as he spoke, "I know you're in a lot of pain right now, but the good news is that it'll be over real soon!" He backed out, with St. John, and the door swung shut with a clang of finality.

Martha and Jonathan were instantly on their knees beside their son. Lois seized the Kryptonite and carried it to the farthest corner of the room. The Kents helped Clark to drag himself to the opposite corner, in an effort to put as much distance between himself and the deadly stuff as he could. Lois crouched by him, trying futilely to shield him from its lethal radiation with her own body.

It couldn't be done. Clark slumped against his mother, nearly helpless, a sheen of sweat on his face. Cold mist began to pour from vents about the room.

It was Martha who spoke. "I've got an idea. Superman, do you think you've got enough strength left to freeze that overhead vent?" She pointed upwards. Lois looked at her in surprise. Martha Kent was no helpless little old lady. She was a woman of determination who thought on her feet. The irrelevant thought went through Lois's mind;

no wonder Clark liked strong women! He'd been raised by one! Maybe they had a chance, after all.

"Yes!" Clark gasped.

"Okay. Jonathan, get the Kryptonite!"

The room was lead lined. If they could get the vicious green stuff behind that shield, Clark would recover quickly, Lois thought. Now it all depended on Clark and Jonathan.

The older man scrambled to obey as Clark took in a deep lungful of air, and blew.

Freezing air blasted the vent; Lois could see the metal literally whiten as ice crystals coated the bars.

"Throw it at the vent, Jonathan!"

Lois turned, holding her breath, in time to see Jonathan Kent throw the glowing rock with the precision of a major league pitcher. The brittle metal of the bars shattered as it struck, and the Kryptonite vanished into the dark shaft beyond.

It was bare minutes later that Clark was on his feet, still shaky, but already recovering from the poisonous effects of the plum-sized piece of his home planet. A few minutes more and he wrenched the door from its fastenings to set them all free.

"Stay back," he cautioned. "Let me go first."

He strode ahead of them until they reached the room where Mazik and St. John had confronted them, and stopped.

"What is it, Clark?" Lois asked. She was unaware of the astonished look Martha Kent gave her.

Clark's voice sounded shaken. "We don't have to worry. It's all right."

Lois hurried to join him, and halted in complete shock.

Two bodies lay on the floor. Jason Mazik had a bullet wound in the middle of his chest, probably from the pistol that lay beside the body of Nigel St. John. Superman was bending over the older man, and as she watched, he sniffed. "Poison. I guess the old chestnut about honor among thieves applies, after all." He went to Mazik and slipped a hand into the inside pocket of his jacket. When he withdrew it, he held a slim, leather bound book.

"What is it?" Lois asked. "The diary?"

Clark nodded. "The diary. I'd sure like to know where it came from, though."

"Me, too. I'd like to read it, but after that you'd better destroy it. We don't want it to get into the wrong hands again."

"That's for sure." Clark handed it to her. "You keep it for now, Lois. We need to get out of here, and I have to call the police."

"The diamonds," she remembered suddenly.

"They're in Mazik's pocket. We'll let the police find them, and draw the obvious conclusion." Clark gave her a very sober smile. "I don't feel much like explaining. Do you?"

"Not really," she said. "The less either of us says, the better."

It was the following day before things quieted down enough that Lois was able to really talk to Clark about all the things that had happened over the last couple of days. Both had been as uncommunicative as possible over just exactly how they had managed to bag the exclusive on the double murder at the old air base. Martha and Jonathan Kent had embarked that afternoon on the first leg of their anniversary trip to Rome, and Lois and Clark walked slowly home by way of Centennial Park.

Lois looked up at the tall, dark and very handsome man at her side. Clark--her very own Superman--and yet, for all his super powers, a man with as many failings and insecurities, and as capable of making mistakes as any other.

She'd watched him closely since he'd told her his secret and had learned more about him than he had any idea of...and it was a funny thing, but she'd found the things that made him imperfect endeared him to her more than the flashy costume. She still had questions to ask him--lots of them. But the time for anger had passed.

He looked down at her and smiled his trademark Superman grin, and she felt her heart do a silly little flip flop.

Hold it, Lane, she reminded herself. She wasn't going to let him off the hook that easily.

"What are you thinking about, Lois?"

She glanced up at the thick layer of clouds overhead that obscured the moon and the few stars bright enough to be seen through the haze of Metropolis's city lights. "I think we ought to get under cover. Then, I'm thinking we can order out for a pizza to go with that pack of beer I got for you today...and we can sit down and talk. You've got a lot of questions to answer, buster." She took the sting out of her words by reaching out to slip her hand into his.

He grinned more widely. "Your wish is my command, my queen."

Lois gasped. He had scooped her into his arms and it was Superman who was flying with her through the air in the direction of her apartment. After a second she relaxed and watched the lights of the city roll past beneath. It was going to be a very interesting evening. She knew that beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Probably the most interesting evening of her life.

The End

End
file.